

The University of Chicago

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND
SCIENTIFIC METHOD

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

1937

By
DAVID MALAIPERUMAN

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FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN RELATIONS
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PREFACE

This pamphlet is a brief summary of a doctorate dissertation, submitted to the University of Chicago, and later presented at a seminar of the Institute of Oriental Students. The author is deeply grateful to Mrs. George Biller, Director of the Institute of Oriental Students, for her kindly interest in making this publication possible. He wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the following members of the faculty for their counsel and guidance: E. S. Ames, E. E. Aubrey, W. E. Garrison, C. Hartshorne, A. E. Haydon, C. W. Morris, and especially Professor Henry Nelson Wieman who acted as thesis advisor.



Mystical Experience and Scientific Method

Mysticism in the past had been treated either as a supernatural theory for gaining access to divine realms or as a method of intuition over and above that of critical reason; some have regarded it primarily as a metaphysical question or as an epistemological problem, while still others have treated mysticism purely as a psychological problem; some have gone to the extremes of interpreting the phenomena only in terms of the pathological theory. The present undertaking is an attempt to correlate the views and findings of those who have adopted the scientific method of inquiry in their study of mysticism, and to find a common ground on which the mystic outlook of the ancient East and the scientific world-view of the modern West may meet and pave the way for a synthetic *Weltanschauung*.

Any sane theory pertaining to mysticism must take into account the common elements and varied factors involved in all types of mystical experience, of all religions and all times. We are primarily concerned with the experience *per se* rather than with the cult of mysticism, which latter denotes the practice and theory whereby the experience is sought and cherished. The mystical element may be traced back to the primitive concept of *Mana*, which signifies the emotional reaction to the unknown and mysterious complexity of the surrounding universe. It refers to the reaction of early man to the *unknown*, a psycho-biological reaction free from theorizing or questioning, the thrill yielding exaltation, elation and fear. Primitive man was given to wondering, groping into the vast unknown and imagining, when confronted with the strange and mysterious forces of nature and unfamiliar objects in the environment. It is not the mere unfamiliarity of facts "fuzzy with mystery" which initiates mystical reaction. Rather mystical experience is awareness of that for which the existing equipment of organized habits and impulses is not sufficient to make adequate adjustment. Features of the environment and intricacy of stimuli are found to be too overwhelming for specific response.

There are various ways whereby one may react to the complexity of environmental stimuli: (a) through fanciful and wishful thinking; (b) through intelligent inquiry; (c) with strong emotion such as love, fear, awe and reverence, but with minimum of imaginative construction. In the first instance, through fantasy and imagination, the complexity of environmental stimuli may attain in the imagination the status of a spirit endowed with characteristics, and thus gain the semblance of reality with which one's organized behavior can deal. In the second case, *Mana* may be the starting point of rational or selfconscious orientation to the world. On the other hand, mystical reaction exists where the subject does not attempt to bring the uninterpreted stimuli into the form of familiar objects, but reacts without understanding. Thus we may trace back to the concept of *Mana* the roots of myth, of science and of mysticism. But despite the development of myth and science there always remain areas of experience which thwart and baffle and

seem to withstand the effort to reduce them to familiar simplicity. These remain as a hinterland of mystery which challenges mankind. When one reacts with love or strong emotion to this area of experience one may be said to be mystical. What can be understood passes into the heritage of knowledge. What is not understood is ordinarily ignored. But when it does arouse emotional response without understanding, we have mystical experience.

In view of the fact that many of the psychological theories have emphasized one or other aspect of mysticism it is necessary to correlate the various findings of psychologists of religion. As a sympathetic critic, William James has laid stress on the noetic quality, ineffability, transiency and passivity of the mystic state of consciousness. He has also indicated the functioning of the subliminal region of consciousness. Introspective psychologists such as Delacroix have attempted to clarify the inner psychic states of the mystic; while, on the other hand, analytical psychology has rendered valuable service in understanding the external manifestations of the experience, its incidental features and pathological phenomena. Functionalism is characterized by three typical approaches that are mutually supplementary. G. A. Coe has laid stress on the temperament of the mystic, his enhanced sensitivity, suggestibility and richness of subconscious process; Leuba has laid stress on the importance of basic instincts and fundamental tendencies pertaining to the experience; E. S. Ames has taken into account the emotional quality of the experience as well as the social and environmental factors. Thus mystical experience is considered as a mode of adjustment and reaction under the stimulus of varying conditions of social environment. John Dewey's position is more tenable since he has taken all the three aspects of the functional approach into consideration. He has pointed out how the self is always directed to something beyond itself, and that the sense of the union of the ideal and actual, may, with some persons, be furthered by mystical experience. James Pratt and Robert Thouless have taken a very reasonable position and the eclecticism of the former is remarkable. They are cognizant of both the individual as well as social factors that enter into the experience, and they are willing to differentiate between the mild and extreme mystics. Hocking's clarification of the principle of alternation is invaluable in understanding the solitary and social aspects of mysticism. Psychology, being one of the younger sciences, has yet to give a conclusive interpretation of mystical experience. Here is a field that Gestalt psychology may venture to investigate further.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of mystical experience is the *sense of wholeness*. When some overwhelming experience of reality which is not mediated through established habit, custom or dogma breaks in upon the individual, one undergoes such an experience of merged totality. Psychologically it is the result of the breaking down of the narrow limits of selective consciousness, the release of subconscious areas, the diffusion of an organized system of responses, and freedom from repressions and tensions. The possibility of such an experience of wholeness, which is free from the more laborious step-by-step method of analytical procedure, has been recognized by recent psycho-

logy. Gestaltists maintain that all percepts involve qualities dependent on the way in which sensory elements are integrated, and they further stress the necessity of the study of organized wholes as they occur in experience and performance. The sense of wholeness is the reaction to the whole of experienced reality in synthesis. One is thus exposed to a vast range of stimuli, of which the individual is not aware in ordinary life, and which has to be formulated into specific patterns before attaining perceptual level.

Such mystics as claim imperviousness to external stimuli are affected by their environment mostly through the margin of consciousness. In rare moments, the penumbral region of consciousness, replete with hidden psychic activities, floods the senses with awareness and feelings. Modern research shows that there are constantly active the obscure phases of conscious operations which are capable of combining and recombining, of modifying and integrating past experiences. These come to the surface of consciousness often in a most surprising manner in patterns or shapes very different from any of their prior organization. This process gives the clue to the understanding of mystical insights, revelations, the emergence of sudden meaningfulness, and the subsequent solution of problems. Hence it is no more necessary to postulate a sixth sense, an instinct of transcendence, a faculty of faith or a principle of self-verification in order to explain the seemingly anomalous experience of the mystic. We do not lay any claim to stimuli beyond those that come through sensory channels. Mystical experience is in no sense supernatural; rather it is super-usual or super-normal. The capacity to react to something more than the known entities is a natural gift in some cases. In others, whose minds and powers of correlation and association are insufficiently elastic for sensing areas of experience as yet unspecified in their nature, the experience may be achieved through continued practice and cultivation of a more inclusive interest as well as an attitude of wider receptivity.

When there is the impingement on consciousness of that which cannot be understood, it is impregnated with the emotions that surround the mysterious. Before such glow of ineffable mystery all habitual responses melt down into diffusion, and in extreme cases to confusion. Abnormality may be due to various factors such as fixation of attention, temperamental condition, hyper-suggestibility, incapacity for re-orientation and lack of rhythm or alternation. One should be cautious enough to take the whole process involved in mystical experience into consideration rather than isolated states of consciousness or the incidental and secondary manifestations. The essential error in the pathological theory regarding mysticism in general is to have seen only part of the whole question. The emotional theory of mystical experience is not necessarily identical with the pathological. Confusion between the datum of experience and the reaction of the individual mystic may lead one to jump to such conclusions as are postulated by the pathological theory. The value of the experience depends on something deeper than the trance state itself. The symptoms of the best mystics do not correspond with those of the patients in the psychiatric clinic, nor do they have the same significance. What is unusual is not necessarily abnormal.

In regard to the accusation that the mystics are anti-social, it is necessary to point out that it holds true only of static mysticism. Social efficiency is not the criterion of spiritual stature. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?" The great mystics and prophets were those who were especially sensitive to the social interactions of the age, and they held a strategic position so that these interactions functioned through them. Jeremiah, Jesus, Buddha, John Woolman, George Fox and Ramakrishna are among those great revolutionaries and reformers whose messages reverberate even unto the present day.

Numerous are the ways and expressions of the mystic vision of the whole. We are not, however, concerned with such pseudo-mystical states as those artificially induced by intoxicants, frenzied dancing, fasting, ceremonials, esoteric cults and orgiastic rites. Nor are we interested in such states that result from shock, fatigue, frustration, over-emotionalism and fixation. Rather we are interested in the best types of mystical experience such as aesthetic experience, the mysticism of human fellowship, of romantic love, mystical worship and prophetic experience. Mystical experience becomes religious when one reacts with intense love, devotion and loyalty to the wholeness of things and events, fully aware that his patterns of thought fall short of the concrete reality and that he is dependent on this process of dynamic inter-relationship, which is replete with value, for his security and fulfillment.

Amidst the discrepancy between the increasing complexity of present day civilization, and the capacity of the human organism to cope with circumstance, there is the dearth of just those values which the mystics have heralded time and again—joy, peace, strength, harmony, vision, perspective and transmutation of pain. These arise out of the conviction of belonging to a greater whole of which the individual is only a part.

We have already stated that in mystical experience there are sense stimuli without perception. It is a state of undefined awareness. Instead of definition of the object that normally functions in all experience, in the case of the mystics it amounts to a feeling of identity with what is experienced. In the process of attempted conceptualization there may be a shift from one meaning to another until some interpretative concept is aroused that may, in some measure, fit the new situation. But even if one should succeed in conceptualization of the experience, the patterns of thought fall short of the concrete richness of data which the artist, lover and the mystic alone are capable of apprehending. Undefined awareness is the state of transition between the imagery and established beliefs, which served to interpret one's deeper quest in the past, and those as yet unframed symbols which shall serve to interpret the deeper life of the future. The mystic cannot *know* what he is experiencing when the data pour into his consciousness, unless they are defined; and he does not have the concepts with which to define them.

Since scientific method has only recently been used in the field of religious inquiry, the stock of concepts at its disposal is inadequate to the interpretation of mystical experience. Hence we need to call to

our aid philosophic inquiry to clarify the concept of supreme value. This does not however minimize the fact that scientific method needs to be used in a special way in the search after most worthwhile reality. How may we integrate the mystic quest with scientific method in the pursuit of the supreme good?

There are four essential factors involved in the search for the supremely worthwhile: (a) there must be the eager anticipation and driving zest; man's deepest urge and longing is the quest for more abundant life; (b) one must turn in the right direction and gain access to the proper data, one must have an appreciation of value; (c) one must have a method of inquiry to test the values and determine that which is supremely worthwhile; (d) these values must be further tested by experimental living. This process requires the alternation of mystical experience and scientific method. In the last analysis mysticism has methodological significance. The correct understanding of the nature of that sustaining reality on which humanity is dependent for the highest values and enhanced living is the most precious knowledge that we can ever hope to attain. There is no other means of achieving knowledge relative to the supremely worthwhile than by way of mystical experience combined with the method of observation, analysis, criticism, reason and experiment. How these may function together we shall proceed to show. We shall use the term *God* to symbolize the object of our supreme concern.

The religious quest requires two things: (a) mystical experience as one of the great sources of religious insight; (b) scientific method as a means of testing the insight. The way mystical experience yields insight is as follows. First of all there must be the longing and deep yearning for oneness with the ongoing process of value in the universe. One must be emancipated from the constraints of theoretical and practical consciousness, must become intensely sensitive and receptive, and must expose oneself to the total stimuli. The conditions for the free and spontaneous play of impulses, as well as the total psycho-physical capacity for appreciation, must be provided. One must restrict inquiry to the realm of empirical search and put aside all claim to knowledge save that alone which is established by scientific method. This well tested fact will be used as a tool in the exploration of the wealth of unexplored reality which looms in mystery. Such a mystic will be humble, appreciative and reverent; he will give up all his cherished hopes, longings, desires, heart-warming beliefs, accepted ideals and any *a priori* assumption as to the nature of God. He knows only that there is a supreme reality, higher than his hopes, greater than his ideals, richer than all his concepts, loftier than all his beliefs or pet theories, much more precious than all the dogmas, something which commands his all-absorbing loyalty and elicits loving devotion. Deeply sensitized, he allows his whole self to be pervaded by the unifying activity of the object. He is uplifted by the sustaining reality of God, becomes emotionally suffused and appreciative of the concrete fullness of the datum in its undifferentiated totality. Emancipated from the complexities of ordinary existence, he senses the higher unity which is replete with undefined meaningfulness. Instead of focusing on values which are but

meagrely abstracted in language he reacts to the wholeness of God. The heightening of creative imagination and the deep qualitative richness of immediate experience are conducive to the dawn of insight. Instead of reveling in blissful ecstasy he seeks to understand the nature of that reality which commands his supreme devotion. However vaguely this illimitable mystery may be apprehended, the experience of the mystic is of such a nature that out of it may arise some clue as to the finding of facts related to supreme reality.

Having attained the insight through mystical experience, the mystic should proceed to test it and determine the criterion by which the sustaining reality may be distinguished. He finds that isolated entities become significantly illumined through the vision of wholeness. He must return to the area of hard empirical facts to test and verify the insights. Through observation and reason he will seek to formulate a proposition so that the immediate data may be fitted into a pattern. But this proposition will be accepted only as a theory without any claim to cover more than a very meagre part of the ineffable mystery. The theory will attain the status of knowledge only when it meets rigorous tests through rational inference and experimental behavior. He must constantly return to the veil of immediacy and regain the sense of dynamic inter-relationship in order to attain perspective, energy and sense of direction. Mere enjoyment of experience does not constitute value. What is once consummatory must in turn be instrumental to the emerging sequence of values. Through experimental behavior one realizes that integrative interaction and shareability are important aspects of that actuality which sustains unknown possibilities of highest value. One thus regards one's own problem to be the general difficulty of others and is willing to share with other persons the joys of solving the problem.

Such a mystic as we have referred to is a bold experimenter who has discovered some of the conditions favorable in the progressive realization of the supreme goal of humanity. He is one who is able to reorient himself to the envisaged ideals rather than cling tenaciously to old concepts. He will regard abstract and attested propositions or theories as essential, but will be prepared to look always beyond to the further possibilities that may yet be unraveled.

To attain progressively knowledge of supreme good, two steps are essential: (a) mystical experience, which goes beyond established meanings and leads to awareness of a system of meaningfulness yet to be specified; (b) reflective thinking, which is necessary to achieve cognitive clarity. Thus, only those who can combine and integrate the greatest rigor of reason with the utmost capacity for devotion and appreciation shall rise above the perplexities and intricacies of the work-a-day world and interact with that process of dynamic interrelationship which sustains the supreme good.

